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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BASRAH 000067

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: BASRAH VOTER REGISTRATION UPDATE

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REASON: 1.4 (b)

¶1. (C/REL MCFI) SUMMARY: Governorate Electoral Office (GEO) Director Hazim Joda assessed voter registration in Basrah as on track but with low numbers, yet he remains optimistic. Security has been good and only a few minor problems have been reported. He said he generally trusts the Iraq Army (IA) but not the Iraqi Police (IP). Communication with the Iraqi High Electoral Commission (IHEC) has improved, but the GEO remains short-staffed. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) On July 30, Poloff met Basrah Province GEO Director Hazim Joda and International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) rep Christian Donn to evaluate the progress of the registration process for regional elections (Note: The registration period began on July 15 and is scheduled to end on August 14. End Note.)

¶3. (SBU) According to Joda the overall picture is good. Voter registration documents arrived on time from Dubai and all 34 voter registration centers (VRCs) across the province are open for business. Five NGOs are supporting the VRCs. Hazim expressed satisfaction with local media support and confidence that the current registration list is over 90 percent accurate.

¶4. (SBU) Despite the optimism, however, Hazim expressed concern over the relatively low numbers of people contacting or visiting the VRCs. As of July 29, the VRCs had received only 8,065 visitors in a province estimated to have 588,822 registered voters (less than two percent of those eligible). Individuals opting to verify their information by telephone numbered considerably higher, but still only represented about eight percent of the total.

¶5. (C/REL MCFI) Hazim discounted voter intimidation as a plausible reason for the low registration. Rather, he believes most people are discouraged by the election process. He explained that many people were disappointed with the performance of candidates they chose during the last election, and are therefore ashamed. He said masses of uneducated people in Basrah were discouraged by the Provincial Council's poor governance, which he believes has fostered public apathy towards the election process. He opined that this is not a problem unique to Basrah.

¶6. (C/REL MCFI) Staffing has been a problem for the GEO and employee shortages remain. Hazim thinks the hiring process is part of the problem, as all employment applications are first vetted through IHEC in Baghdad. Only after IHEC selects a candidate is the information forwarded to the Basrah GEO for interview, which limits the GEO's ability to hire candidates quickly. Hazim complained that IHEC was not passing essential

information to the applicants. For instance, many candidates interviewed in Basrah were not aware of the length of their employment contract, and retracted their application upon learning that it was for an entire month. Civil service salaries were initially a problem, but were recently doubled. Staffing gaps persist, however, as there are still 15 vacancies at the GEO, including an essential IT position. IFES representative Donn told Hazim that he would mention this to IHEC and expressed concern over the lack of adequate IT support.

¶7. (C/REL MCFI) Although Hazim said that communication with IHEC is improving, he nevertheless complained about the lack of responsiveness, saying IHEC is still living in the "days of Saddam Hussein," when communication was "top-down and one-way."

¶8. (C/REL MCFI) According to Hazim, security of GEO personnel has been adequate at the VRCs. He identified the Iraqi Police (IP), whom he described as untrustworthy "looters," as a problem. He mentioned a video clip he had received, made from a mobile phone, showing a policeman ripping an IHEC poster from a wall in Basrah (Hazim claimed to have permission to hang IHEC posters anywhere). Hazim believes the Iraqi Army (IA) is more responsive and trustworthy than the police, although isolated abuses still take place. He described an incident in which members of an NGO were prevented from passing through an IA checkpoint en route to a VRC in Abellah. Despite showing proper identification and a letter from the GEO, NGO members were threatened with arrest and told to turn around.

¶9. (C/REL MCFI) Hazim described his relationship with Governor Wa'ili and other provincial leaders as courteous and professional, but only because maintaining the relationships is essential to his position as GEO. "As a private citizen, I am ashamed of them," he confided. Hazim wants elections as quickly as possible, saying that personally, he would hold elections on October 1. "We need to change the current government," he said.

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¶10. (C/REL MCFI) Comment: Although election preparation is proceeding apace in Basrah, Hazim is likely correct that low voter registration is partially a reflection of disenchantment with the elections process. If so, this disenchantment is likely to increase following news of the delayed passage of the provincial elections law. An alternate explanation is that low voter turnout represents confidence in the public distribution system and that names are correctly entered in the voter registry. End Comment.

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